

PUBLIC SERVICE REVIEW

Spring 2021 | Volume 2 | Issue 1



Public Service in an Entirely New Light

Hear more from students, like Erica Colston, a University of Texas Bill Archer Fellow who learned to adapt and embrace new opportunities when her dream internship fell through

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PUBLIC SERVICE REVIEW

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STARKVILLE, MISSISSIPPI OFFICE

One Research Blvd., Suite 104
Starkville, MS 39759
(662) 325-8409

WASHINGTON, D.C. OFFICE

201 Massachusetts Ave. NE, Suite C-7
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(202) 546-1837

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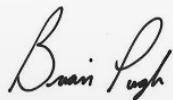
LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This past year has been one of the most unprecedented, arduous times in modern history. The COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized by disruption, uncertainty, and what felt like a lifetime of trials and tribulations for many. But it has also been characterized by perseverance, hope, and inspiration. In this special edition of *Public Service Review*, you will meet 12 students from across the United States who embody what it means to persevere, have hope, and inspire in these unrelentless times.

For instance, you will hear from Cameron Lynch, a William & Mary sophomore who found her voice through activism during the COVID-19 pandemic. You will also hear from Erica Colston, a University of Texas Bill Archer Fellow who learned to adapt and embrace new opportunities when her dream internship fell through. Keshav Raghu, a student at the University of Chicago, reflects on how he used his skills acquired through high school Congressional Debate competition to help local nonprofits build capacity in the Hyde Park community.

This edition also includes inspirational interviews with U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell and former U.S. Rep. Martha Roby, who reflect on their friendship, bipartisanship, and the future of public service, and Antwyn Brown, Chief of Staff to the Dekalb County School District in Georgia, who shares his insights on public service in the education sector and how his school district adapted to meet the needs of more than 100,000 students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Their stories, in addition to others featured in the journal, offer an opportunity to reflect on the remarkable resilience of our nation's youth and instill a fresh sense of hope for our nation's future. As the storm of this pandemic clears, we must not forget the determination and endurance of our nation's youngest public servants.



Dr. Brian Pugh
Executive Director
Stennis Center for Public Service



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ALICIA ARGRETT

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

Interview with U.S. Reps. Terri Sewell and Martha Roby



Alicia Argrett is a freshman at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), where she majors in neuroscience with a minor in business management. She is a high school graduate from the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science and is from Madison, Mississippi. She is on the pre-medical track at UAB and hopes to become a board-certified plastic surgeon. She is currently involved in the University Student Government Association on the Freshman Forum Council.

Read an excerpt of Alicia's interview with U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell (D-AL) and former U.S. Rep. Martha Roby (R-AL) on how to work across the aisle, the nuances of public service, and why it's important for young generations to "Get into some good trouble, necessary trouble." You can find the full transcript and video of the interview online at www.stennis.gov.

What advice would you give to aspiring legislators?

Terri Sewell: Legislating is a team sport. It's not like being an executive. To pass legislation, you have to convince other people to vote with you. It takes 218 people agreeing to pass legislation in Congress. So, the first place I look to when I am trying to pass legislation is my own delegation: the Alabama delegation. There are seven of us in the delegation. What I think is key is learning to compromise. You may have an idea about a public policy issue, and as you're gathering votes, people will have other ideas that may change aspects of your policy but will achieve the same goal. For example, I have recently been working on incentivizing the

state of Alabama to expand Medicaid, and I have a bill that would do that. In order to get some of my Republican colleagues to agree with me, I had to change the nature of the bill. The goal is to get Medicaid expanded in the state of Alabama.

The best advice I can give to aspiring legislators is to remember that legislating is a team sport, and you really need to be able to compromise. That means working across the aisle.

Martha Roby: I agree. When I was thinking about this question, I even went a bit further back to entering public service and what might drive someone to do so. I ran for city council when I was 26 years old and felt compelled to get involved in my community. God willing, my husband Riley and I were going to have kids and raise them in this community, and quite frankly, I just wanted a seat at the table to help make it better. I didn't know how to go about it, so I sought out the advice and counsel of people around me who were already in public service to ask, "What does this look like? How do I even do this?"

First, get involved in your community. Find issues that are important to you, and seek out opportunities to serve through nonprofit organizations, to engage with your city council or your county commission, get to know your state legislators, find out what policy is taking shape and being debated, and learn about it so you can clearly identify your personal positions and principles. You have to know who you are; you have to know what is important to you. So, the first piece of advice would be to get involved in your community. Start forming those relationships now because being an effective legislator is all relationship-driven.

The second piece of advice I would give for aspiring legislators is to find a mentor. Do not wait for the mentor to find you. I think I can speak for both of us that we are ready and willing to be any young person's mentor who wants to seek advice and counsel about moving forward in public service, particularly elected office. You need to seek out a mentor; don't be shy! Don't wait for that person to ask you. Show up where they are, meet them where they are, and say, "I really would love to have your advice and counsel." The more people you can get input from as you are making your career decisions, the better position you will be in seeking elected office.

Sewell: That's great advice. My mom, who was the first Black woman to be on the city council in Selma, used to have a saying: bloom where you're planted. You can make a difference right where you are. So, I totally agree with Martha and would even go further in saying: consider shadowing someone. You can ask your city council member, your mayor, your member of Congress if there is a way you can shadow them for a day just to see what they do.

I would also encourage you to volunteer. Volunteer on a campaign if you're thinking about running for office or volunteer to advocate on an issue that matters to you. You can make a difference right where you are: in your school, your college, your church, your synagogue.

What do you consider most rewarding about your job?

Roby: One of the things people don't realize that we do as members of Congress every day is constituent advocacy. People typically just think of us being in D.C. in our committee hearings, on the floor with our voting cards, acting as the conscience for our districts. What a lot of people don't realize is that each member of Congress has multiple offices within our districts, and within those offices, we have caseworkers who are advocates for our constituents. So, when someone walks through the door of our district office or picks up the phone to call, a lot of times, they are just at the end of their rope. They have tried to cut through multiple layers trying to deal with a government agency, and they come to us and say, "We need help." I'm going to tell you that the men and women who work in our district offices are changing lives for the better every single day.

There are so many stories I could tell you where I've run into a veteran in the grocery store, and with tears in his or her eyes, they have thanked me for the work that the folks in our district offices did on their behalf that was literally life-changing. On my worst, most frustrating day in Washington, D.C., I could reflect on the positive outcomes that had taken place through constituent advocacy and in district offices. That was truly the most rewarding part of the job.

Sewell: Ditto! The most rewarding part of our job is the ability to help the people who have elected us and the ability to really make a difference in their lives. You have to get 218 people to agree with you to pass a bill, which is pretty hard. But every day, the people in our district offices work incredibly hard to address the needs of our constituents. They do that by



TOP: U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell, BOTTOM: U.S. Rep. Martha Roby

see page 35



FRANCIE SENTILLES AND CATE BYRNE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Through Grief, We Serve

APPLES Service-Learning is known throughout the Carolina campus as an umbrella program, covering a massive network of service opportunities and connections. The organization is unique in its ability to center reflection and learning at the heart of all affiliated service experiences. Our goal is to ensure that students think critically about the communities they enter and the activities they engage in via our programs. This priority has been integral to APPLES throughout its 31-year history.

However, the last year – the year we were the most physically distant from our programs and responsibilities – is the year much of the APPLES team (leadership and program participants alike) did our most honest and meaningful reflection about our shared work. The following piece was written by the outgoing APPLES President Francie Sentilles to shed light on what it has meant to serve, live, and be human in the last year.

As the end of this virtual connection era grows tantalizingly closer, we invite all who read this to take the space and reflect. When life gets stripped down to its basics, the way it has over the last year, the emotions felt and lessons learned can teach us a great deal. Think critically about the experiences you have had this year, as a public servant and simply as a person. Find the lessons, innovations, and relationships you want to hold on to when we return to our “normal” lives and “normal” responsibilities. Find the joy and the growth. Bring it to your communities, wherever they are. We won’t pretend life will be perfectly rosy after the pandemic ends, but we are overjoyed at the thought of returning to our peers and our communities with the renewed purpose this time of reflection has given us. As much as many of us are linked by grief in the past and present, we hope you can join us in the joy we are finding in our futures.

Cate Byrne, 2020-2021 APPLES Vice President

Through Grief, We Serve

- Reflections from Francie Sentilles

“In APPLES, reflection is at the core of everything we do. As my leadership term comes to an end, I’ve been thinking about how to facilitate reflection with my team on all that has happened this year. All the feelings we’ve had: excitement, frustration, disappointment, pride, grief. Above all, grief.

Expectations were high for APPLES as the year 2020 approached. We were celebrating our 30th anniversary of providing service-learning programs at the University of North Carolina (UNC). In April, alumni and community partners had made plans to come to town for a weekend full of events to celebrate APPLES’ history. Our leadership team had been planning the event since August 2019.

But, by the time April came around, none of us were at Chapel Hill.

I became president of APPLES for the 2020-2021 school year at the beginning of March, just a few days before spring break. As our alternative break trip participants headed off across North Carolina, and I traveled to Asheville with friends, we never suspected that we might not meet in person again during the remainder of the year.

I did not return to Chapel Hill until August, and I have yet to spend time with this year’s APPLES team in person. Last March, I would have named several APPLES peers among my closest friends. Most of them graduated in May. Even as I grieved the loss of my last few months with close friends, I also began to grieve

the friendships that never developed on the team I now lead.

The pandemic-era grief is not like any feeling I have experienced before. It comes on slowly, as it dawns on me that one more thing will be canceled, always 'out of an abundance of caution.' It hangs over everything we do these days. But after over 30 years of organizing service-learning programs at UNC, APPLES is a well-oiled machine. Our job is simply to keep it running. The challenge we face is how to do that, even as we grieve the loss of our 'normal' programming and the myriad of other changes brought on by COVID-19.

The first key for our team has been honesty. None of us are pretending that virtual service-learning experiences will be as rich, for students or community partners, as in-person work. But we also are owning the reality that we can design programs that come surprisingly close in richness of experience – and sometimes carry unexpected benefits.

For example, our now-virtual internship offerings are more accessible for students without cars than they were in the past. In a 'normal year,' APPLES interns work with 25 nonprofits within a half-hour drive of Chapel Hill, but only about five of those sites can be accessed by bus or on foot. We've had to reduce our total number of sites this year – some can't accommodate an intern with everything else going on – but now all internships are open to all students, regardless of transportation access. I hope we can maintain this improvement in our program's equity, even as we transition back to in-person service.

In addition to maintaining honesty about both the positive and challenging components of virtual service, we have worked hard to make every aspect of APPLES more adaptable. We have been much more flexible with our student leaders, in particular. Once we realized that alternative breaks would have to be virtual, we allowed break leaders to decide if they still wanted to participate and if they still wanted to focus on the same social issue as originally planned. We typically offer five or six trips across North Carolina during fall, winter, and spring breaks. Each trip focuses on a specific social issue, like civil rights, domestic violence, or hunger and homelessness, and trip participants connect with nonprofits that address the specific topic. This year, we only offered three alternative winter breaks, but two creative break leaders introduced a new theme: COVID-19 and mental health.

I was able to join that break as a participant, and I felt resonance with the leaders' focus on addressing the challenges we are all quietly facing. Ultimately, the



Francie Sentilles at an APPLES Service-Learning Informational Booth Outside of Student Union in August 2020

themes of the break revolved around empathy, which I have found to be the strongest antidote for my pandemic-era grief. We all feel disconnected from one another right now. Physically, we very much are apart. Empathy allows us to bridge that divide. It's how my APPLES team worked together to keep our programs going, even if we never meet in person. It's how we remained engaged with our work and excited about its impact on others, even if we rarely saw the people it impacted. Calling upon that empathy as we design our service-learning programs has made this year far more fulfilling than I would have expected a year of online service could be.



We ended up allocating stipends to more than 30 students who shifted their energy into public service after losing income sources due to the pandemic. Contacting our stipend recipients and hearing about their plans for the funds reminded me how exciting service is and how important it is to step back and see what we can do for others, especially as we grieve.

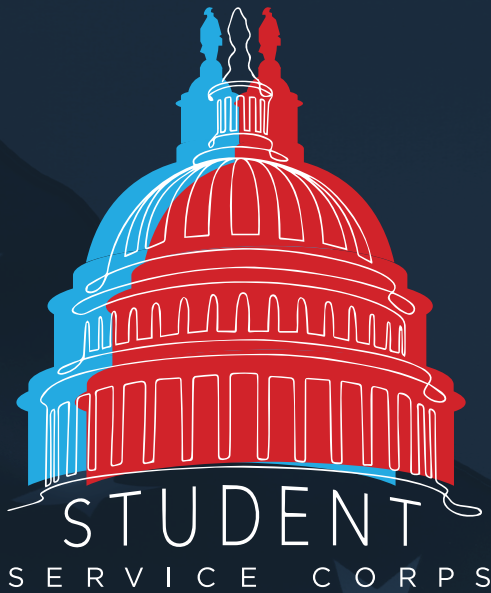


Francie Sentilles

When we ended the 2019-2020 school year with a budget surplus due to canceled programs, our team reflected on how we could use those funds to address the urgent needs of the pandemic in a way that corresponded to our mission. We ended up allocating stipends to more than 30 students who shifted their energy into public service after losing income sources due to the pandemic. Contacting our stipend recipients and hearing about their plans for the funds reminded me how exciting service is and how important it is to step back and see what we can do for others, especially as we grieve.”

APPLES Service-Learning is a student-led program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that transforms educational experiences by connecting academic learning and public service. Since 1990, APPLES has strengthened civic engagement by bringing together students, faculty, and communities in sustained and mutually beneficial partnerships.

To learn more, visit ccps.unc.edu/apples/. ■



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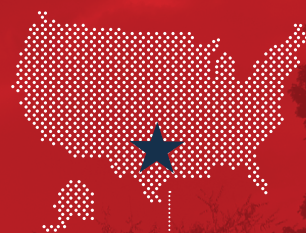
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ERICA COLSTON

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, BILL ARCHER FELLOW

Public Service in an Entirely New Light



As the daughter of a Ukrainian immigrant, I grew up hearing anecdotes about life under the Soviet Union. My mother's personal experiences instilled in me a deep appreciation for our nation's democracy – far more than any textbook could have. My heritage is why I chose to study international relations, but my interest in policy motivates me to work for the country my mother chose.

My passion for public service led me to the Bill Archer Fellowship program – a University of Texas system program, which brings Texans like me to Washington, D.C., to advance their knowledge of American public policy and gain critical professional experience in our nation's capital. Archer Fellows work full-time at an internship while taking a semester's worth of evening classes on the policy-making process, effective advocacy, and American public memory. Central to the experience is building formative relationships during your internship as well as within the cohort. The program helps launch the careers of Texan activists, lawyers, business leaders, scientists, civil servants, politicians, and other leaders dedicated to making our nation better than they found it.

I began drafting my applications in December 2019 with a clear sense of what I wanted my Archer experience to be. As an aspiring foreign service officer, I threw my hat into the ring for one of the most competitive internships in Washington, D.C. – the U.S. Department of State. I submitted my application for the Archer Fellowship program on February 15, 2020, and my State Department internship application in early March with no idea of how consequential those dates would become.

When I heard both the Archer Fellowship program and the State Department accepted me, I thought I hit the professional home run of my dreams as a college student. My first-choice bureau chose me to work on my exact area of interest – Eastern European regional security. But over the course of months, COVID-19 programmatic updates trickled in. In May, Archer told us in a meeting: “Unfortunately, all Archer classes will be held online with options for rotating in-person class attendance.” I submitted my application for a security clearance in late May and waited anxiously for updates all summer since I heard from a friend that the summer cohort was outright canceled. I still had naïve hope I would be able to be in person by the fall. By late July 2020, the State Department emailed: “It has been determined that the Fall 2020 internship session will be virtual only,” and I think I cried for the rest of that day.

In late August, I landed in Washington, D.C., with no further updates from the State Department about my clearance and roommates starting their internships the next week. Thankfully, Archer program staff offered advice and support, knowing that students who intern at the State Department usually do not get their clearance until after the program starts. However, by mid-September, I started to panic and was told I should seek other options despite the “typicality” of the delay. How on earth was I supposed to find a new internship when I was already committed to another? “Hello, I am applying for your internship, but if I get it, I might have to leave the next week for the one I actually want.” It was not the best argument for finding a last-minute placement.

Thankfully, one of my apartment-mates (and now, one of best friends) told me she was emailing the U.S. Capitol Historical Society (USCHS) about an internship. USCHS, a nonpartisan nonprofit created by Congress to steward the building's history, needed help organizing the office and managing administrative tasks while the pandemic restricted staff access. I scheduled a



TOP: Erica and friend at U.S. Capitol, BOTTOM: Erica at U.S. Capitol

phone call with the president, Jane Campbell, about my situation and received a warm welcome, plenty of understanding, and a temporary internship offer. I counted myself lucky that I would learn about nonprofit management within the context of my other great academic love – American political history.

As the semester progressed, it became clearer and clearer that USCHS would become more than a temporary solution. I never received my security clearance to start my State Department internship. Instead, I grew into increasingly more responsible roles at the Society. By the end of my internship, I went from organizing filing cabinets to influencing programmatic decisions for a guest speaker series – “Toward a More Perfect Union” – to run from late 2020 through spring 2021. As the name suggests, the series invites scholars to examine the historical role of Congress in defining what the ideal of a “perfect union” means to American society.

At USCHS, I was also granted the opportunity few and far between during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among Archer Fellows, my internship was one of the few conducted safely in person. As a result, I worked three out of five days a week, just a short walk from my apartment. Not only did being partially in person do wonders for my sense of personal fulfillment, but it allowed me close professional instruction from Sam Holliday, the director of operations and scholarship, and Jane Campbell, the USCHS president and former mayor of Cleveland, Ohio. I quickly realized I was very lucky that I had the opportunity to build professional relationships beyond the computer screen and enjoy at least some degree of working normalcy.

At USCHS, I could expect to work on a range of projects, like the scholar series, with a great deal of freedom to tailor each project to my interests and make it my own. As a result, the lessons I learned in nonprofit operation and management far exceeded the disappointments of losing my first internship. Learning from Sam and Jane in person also meant enjoying impromptu, informal discussions with them, such as the unique nature of the District of Columbia's representation in Congress or war stories about running for office as a woman.

Despite the roundabout path I took toward working at USCHS, it became the highlight of my semester as a Bill Archer Fellow. The COVID-19 pandemic incurred a fair amount of damage on my sense of professional growth, but it also resulted in unexpected opportunities. Overall, the incredible welcoming I received at USCHS allowed me to advance my aspirations toward public service in an entirely new light. The challenges of working an internship during the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed to me the importance of humility and extending understanding in times of crisis. While I intended for my internship at USCHS to be temporary, I will carry what I learned with me throughout my journey toward public service – regardless of whatever form it may take next. ■



ANDI DAHMER

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY,
TRUMAN SCHOLAR (KY-18)

Global Connectivity in Isolating Times



While March 2020 was characterized by the stress and chaos of an impending pandemic for many, the first week in March last year brought joyous news for me: I was elated to discover that I had been selected for a yearlong Truman-Albright Fellowship with the Stennis Center for Public Service. My first interaction with the Stennis Center was during the summer of 2019 when I served as an intern in the Office of Congressman John Yarmuth (KY-03) during the Truman Scholars Summer Institute. I was immediately captivated by the Center's dedication to collaborative, bipartisan dialogue, and I could see that working with the Center would provide an incredible opportunity to meet servant leaders, friends and mentors, and work toward substantive change.

Barely one week later, however, my joy was upended as the virus began to disrupt every facet of American life. The future of my dream Fellowship became uncertain, and mere days after the first lockdown began, my dream job was canceled. Like so many other recent college graduates, the pandemic had curtailed my career opportunities. Despite my dedication to public service, job opportunities in nonprofit and government sectors evaporated due to lack of funds, uncertainty, and the instability of COVID-19.

While working through a maelstrom of emotions, discouragement, and disappointment, I recognized the importance of resilience in my job search and continued to apply for public-service related positions. Rather than act as a deterrent, COVID-19's impact illuminated a rapidly growing number of problems in the fields of health care, equitable housing, and food insecurity.

Along with the more predictable problems of a pandemic came growing disinformation and mistrust that threatened to weaken American democracy. Ultimately, the virus underscored the need for recent graduates to reinvest in democratic institutions, nonprofits, and public service sectors now more so than ever. It was in this revelation that I found the fortitude and resilience to keep applying despite setbacks.

Over the next three months, I applied to more than 50 positions throughout Washington, D.C. Twice more, I was hired for a job, first with a nonprofit, then with a federal agency. Twice more, I was let go before I could even begin. Whether due to lack of funding in the not-for-profit sector or significant delays in the federal security clearance process due to the virus, which rendered me unable to fill the role within the prospective time frame, job hunting amid the COVID-19 pandemic came with a unique set of challenges. I was not alone. Nearly 3 million women have left the workforce since the pandemic began. Young professionals, especially recent college graduates, have faced barriers to workforce entry not experienced since the 2008 economic crisis. Before I even began my first job, I had been laid off three times!

After enduring more job acceptances-turned-cancellations, I came to a realization: important public service is not limited to Washington, D.C. There is a need for meaningful change in communities all across America, especially in my home state of Kentucky. Further, there are organizations everywhere working to heal communities in crisis and serve our most vulnerable. When I expanded my job search to include Kentucky, I discovered a

unique listing with a local nonprofit helping to mitigate one of the most ubiquitous yet untreated ills of COVID-19 – pandemic isolation in a globally interconnected world. At a time when international travel was essentially prohibited and global exchange was curtailed, international citizen diplomacy is needed more than ever, and the World Affairs Council of Kentucky & Southern Indiana (WAC) is working to bridge this gap.



WAC is a nonprofit, member-based organization in my hometown, Louisville, with a mission “to promote cross-cultural awareness, education, and tolerance through nonpartisan discussions on current international issues.” WAC allows communities to connect with global leaders and engage with peers on international issues through partnerships with the World Affairs Council of America, Global Ties U.S., and Sister Cities International. It is described as the “regional hub” for international exchange, dialogue, and learning.

In July 2020, I was hired as the Exchange Program Manager with WAC. In my role, I coordinate international exchanges through the U.S. Department of State’s International Visitors Leadership Program and host hundreds of visitors each year to explore topics as diverse as Resilience and Support for Human Rights Defenders, STEM education, and Women in Entrepreneurship.

My position has been especially unique because, since March of 2020, we have hosted visitors from more than 30 countries entirely virtually. Even my onboarding with the organization was conducted in a virtual setting, though I have been blessed with a supportive team and kind mentors to ease this transition. Rather than risk contracting COVID-19 through travel, all visitor engagement is conducted through online platforms.

The main components of our virtual exchanges comprise video programming and synchronous tours. While this sounds

complicated, tours can be as simple as walking through a popular museum exhibit with a camera and tripod followed by a digital question and answer session with the museum curator. For example, in one such program, a team of visiting scientists from South Africa met with the Executive Director of the Louisville Zoo and received a behind-the-scenes tour of zoo exhibits and its adaptations to COVID-19 restrictions. In addition to sharing information with visitors, we also work to show them the cultural components of Kentucky through virtual home hospitality dinners and cultural exchanges. Though visitors cannot see our city and its resources in person, we help them feel authentic southern hospitality through virtual bourbon “tastings,” show and tell with cultural artifacts, and even hybrid breakfast/dinners together between disparate time zones.

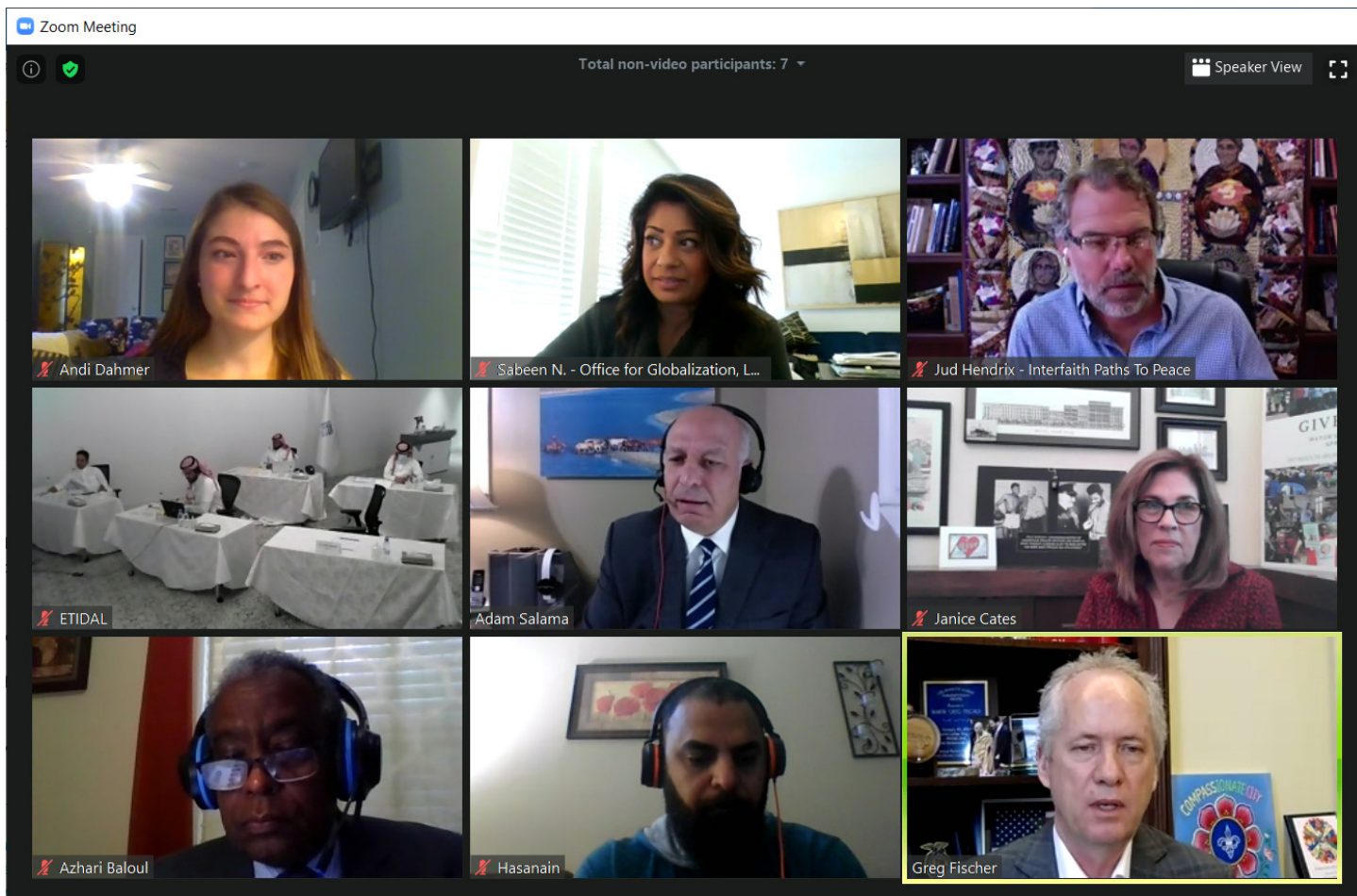
During the past seven months, one of my favorite memories was hosting a virtual delegation from Saudi Arabia on the topic of “Religious Diversity and Interfaith Dialogue.” Louisville was selected to host this program due to the Compassionate Louisville campaign and our national week of volunteer service, “Give-A-Day!,” during which more than 150,000 community members volunteer each spring.

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer personally met with the Saudi delegation to answer questions alongside his staff members. We discussed how Louisville as a city practices models of compassion within its departments, especially as it relates to religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. We were also fortunate to meet with the Director of the Louisville Office of Globalization, Sabeen Nasim, and the original orchestrator of Give-A-Day! and the Director of Compassion Initiatives, Janice Cates.

“ Though we met in a virtual setting, our global connections remain stronger than ever. In some ways, our community members are more accessible virtually than might have been possible in person.

”
Andi Dahmer

Ultimately, through our shared dialogue and mutual exchange of ideas, the visitors discussed the initiatives they would like to replicate in their home communities that Louisville currently



Andi hosting a virtual delegation from Saudi Arabia

implements while Louisvillians learned from international nonprofit leaders about their own community engagement initiatives. Though we met in a virtual setting, our global connections remain stronger than ever. In some ways, our community members are more accessible virtually than might have been possible in person.

Most importantly, through virtual programming with WAC, I developed an appreciation of the power of human connection during one of the most transformative and isolating times in modern history. After studying abroad nine times during my undergraduate career, facilitating international exchange programs for students and young professionals provides a genuine source of excitement to begin work each day – even in an online setting. My job provides an escape from the daily stressors of pandemic life. Throughout my work each day, I travel to multiple countries, meet with international visitors from around the world, and practice my Chinese and Spanish language skills – all during a global pandemic. I am proud to act as a virtual tour guide and conduit for Kentucky, giving the home state I love a window to the world.

I have grown so much through the challenges of the past year. I found resilience I did not know I possessed in relation to the tenuous and ever-changing job market. While I ultimately stayed in my home state and was unable to travel, I became even more globally connected, and I realized the power of citizen diplomacy to combat isolation and forge international interconnectivity.

The pandemic has taught me about the versatility of pathways in public service and the power of adaptation in change making. If this time last year someone had told me I would be living in Kentucky, working internationally, all while never leaving my computer desk, I would have been more than incredulous. Now, I recognize that public servants are not relegated to metro centers on America's coasts and that individual citizen diplomacy can be achieved anywhere – including in middle America. I am proud of the fortitude of a generation of young servant leaders in all regions of the U.S. continuing to mitigate the issues COVID-19 has brought to the forefront of daily life. To other recent graduates struggling with job searching and unique challenges in the pandemic: it gets better. We will get through this together. ■



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KRYSTALYN DENNIS

CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY,
LETTIE PATE WHITEHEAD SCHOLAR



*Public Service Spotlight: A Conversation
with Antwyn Brown, Chief of Staff,
DeKalb County School District*

Mrs. Krystalyn Dennis is a Lettie Pate Whitehead Scholar and member of Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society at Clark Atlanta University, earning her Ph.D. in Humanities with concentrations in African American Studies and English. Her research focuses on pedagogical resources for teachers of twice-exceptional African American students who live with race-based PTSD. Krystalyn is a veteran secondary school educator and teacher leader, serving students with diverse learning needs in Cobb County, Georgia. She plans to continue to support educators and families of students with gifted and talented abilities, disabilities, and other specific learning needs. Her greatest joys are her husband David J. Dennis, Jr. and their children October and Langston.

Recently, Mrs. Dennis sat down with Antwyn Brown, Chief of Staff to the DeKalb County School District, to discuss the education sector and how one of the largest school districts in Georgia adapted to meet its students' diverse needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Krystalyn Dennis: I'm so appreciative of you for taking the time to talk today. I'm Krystalyn Dennis, and I'm hoping to speak with you about your experience as a public service employee in Georgia. Do you mind telling me a bit about the work you do and where you're from?

Antwyn Brown: Thank you for the opportunity. I'm Antwyn Brown, and I'm the chief of staff to the DeKalb County School District. Before this station, I was chief of staff to the DeKalb

County Board of Commissioners, and I was there several years. Before that, I started my career in my hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. I worked with the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, the policy arm of the CDFI (Community Development Financial Institution), now known as Hope Enterprise Corporation. Before that, I worked for the Legislative PEER Committee; PEER is an acronym, standing for Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review. It's an oversight committee of the legislature in Mississippi.

That's been my work history over the last 17 years or more. I had my educational training from Tougaloo College for undergraduate and at Mississippi State University for graduate school.

Dennis: It's great to hear that you're from Mississippi as well. I'm also from Mississippi, and a Ph.D. student at Clark Atlanta University, working in humanities - African American studies and English. It's exciting that you have traveled from Mississippi and can look back on your Mississippi education and apply those skills in Georgia. You said you worked in which school district?

Brown: The DeKalb County School District. DeKalb County is one of the large, urban counties in metro Atlanta. We have a population somewhere tipping over 1 million. DeKalb County School District has a student population with a hair under 100,000 students, and we have in the neighborhood of about 14,000 employees.



Krystalyn interviewing Antwyn Brown

Dennis: Wow, that is amazing. It's great you serve such a large population. I'm sure you're seeing many diverse needs working in DeKalb County Schools. How have you addressed those? What are some of those needs you've addressed during this pandemic?

Brown: When we talk about needs, the needs begin with children in the K-12 department. Those needs have been met and continue to be met, not only by the district but also by our community partners, our corporate partners, and all of the people who have stepped up and helped administer an adequate education to the children in DeKalb County. You are right that there are a number of disparities. There's a spectrum of communities within DeKalb County. Each has its own dynamics and barriers that we make sure we acknowledge and use the best strategies available to navigate. We must ensure that no child goes without the engagement, support, and social-emotional guidance needed during this pandemic while trying to retain a quality level of instruction.

Dennis: That's great. You mentioned three very important words: you said, "strategize," "partnership," and "support." I'm glad to hear that the community has rallied together to help students and teachers during this time. Is there anything that has surprised you during the pandemic within education?

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Usually, we think of surprises in the positive sense, so the positive surprise has been the number of people willing to help and the type of help they've offered. Some have offered help in a very specific way. They'll say, "We have this niche. We see this particular issue, and we'd like to help."

— ” —

Antwyn Brown

Brown: Yes. Usually, we think of surprises in the positive sense, so the positive surprise has been the number of people willing to help and the type of help they've offered. Some have offered help in a very specific way. They'll say, "We have this niche. We see this particular issue, and we'd like to help." For instance, in a population that includes my English language learners, we'll say that English language learners are not forgotten or lost in the shuffle in a virtual environment during the pandemic. The number of people coming out with specific types of assistance has been astounding. Some are also willing to help at large. They'll say, "In any way you need us, if there is anything we can do, plug us in, and we'll do whatever you need us to do." That has been very, very impactful given the level of safety precautions we've had to take, including a lot of the ongoing coaching, not only to our students but to our staff, including our teachers, custodians, and bus drivers.

If I have to look at the more challenging side of a surprise, it has been that 100,000 kids feel like 100,000 kids during a pandemic. Trying to keep everyone engaged, accounted for, and headed in the same cardinal direction while maintaining a certain level of education and assessment has been a surprise. It is a large population to get your arms around, and you're doing the best you can under the circumstances as the data and the science catch up to the necessity of the moment.

Dennis: That's awesome that so many people are working together, planning, and supporting the students' and teachers' needs, which you mentioned as well. I think it's important that as the Stennis Center for Public Service tries to inspire young people to public service, we keep those needs ahead. You mentioned the diverse populations in DeKalb County Schools, like English language learners. Are there any things you hope will remain in a post-COVID-19 world once we get there?

Brown: It remains to be seen because we're not post-COVID-19 at this moment, but I think lessons learned will include but are not limited to the need for agility within our school district, the ability to stop and pivot on a dime if we need to go virtual. We now know what that entails. We know what our infrastructure requirements need to be. We also now have certain indicators to let us know where we are at all times so that we, as a district, are not in a situation where we are required to do something that we don't have the support in place to do. Now, it will be the fact of always packing relatively light, so that if we go back, we go back. If we're virtual, we're virtual. If we're hybrid, we're hybrid. We know what all of those things are, what it will take, and the level of stress it will put on our system. Now, we have the muscle memory to support that level of stress.

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Education is the cornerstone of a thriving community. We should all do our part and more, if possible, to support our schools and our students.

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Antwyn Brown

Dennis: That's great. Your outlook is very hopeful and very positive, which is great to hear because the cliché is that children are our future, and we're preparing for futures that may be unknown. For that, my last question is, what do you want external stakeholders, people not in education, to understand about what you're experiencing now?

Brown: What I want the world to know is that public education, K-12 instruction, is, in my opinion, the cornerstone of strong communities. In essence, in your community, irrespective of where you stand, education means so much to not only the immediate community but to any municipality, county, or state in this nation. Education is the cornerstone of a thriving community. We should all do our part and more, if possible, to support our schools and our students.

Dennis: I appreciate that you've said that. You've made some excellent points that are important and help us realize that education and serving our communities is important. I'm grateful to hear that, especially in DeKalb County Schools, students have support from administrators who hear them and listen to them. That's what we're trying to do: make sure that every student's voice is heard and that we respond. Thank you so much for talking with me today and have a great day.

Brown: Thank you. I appreciate this opportunity. ■



BEN HAMMOND

DIRECTOR OF CONGRESSIONAL PROGRAMS,
STENNIS CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE,
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Reflections from Capitol Hill

Growing up, I never imagined myself working in politics, much less wanting to pursue a career studying it. I always thought I would stay close to home, follow in my father's and grandfather's footsteps, and become a third-generation lawyer in Mississippi.

Not every path to Capitol Hill involves a political science degree and a penchant for public policy. As a double-major in international studies and history at the University of Mississippi, I stumbled into my first job in Congress by pure circumstance: it was the only work I could find between May 2006, when I graduated from college, and February 2007, when I was due to depart for South Africa on a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship. But U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran, who chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee at the time, and was himself a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar in 1964, offered me an internship, and I took it. Those seven months turned out to be an unexpected opportunity for me, and I found myself lured in by the legislative work done at Appropriations Committee markups.

After that year in South Africa, where I studied comparative race relations at Rhodes University, I jumped at the chance to return to public service on the Senate Appropriations Committee. For policy wonks, it is one of the great jobs on Capitol Hill – centered on legislating, not campaigning. Staffers provide professional expertise in drafting appropriations bills as they make their way through the legislative process. As such, it requires a jack-of-all-trades skill set of budget analysis, consensus-building, and negotiating.

In my first job on the committee, I specialized in budgets for the U.S. Department of Defense's military construction program and for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Thankfully, I had a kind and patient boss who did not mind answering questions and a counterpart who was willing to take me under his wing and teach me the art of appropriating. I loved the job, and it was during that time as a junior staffer that I had my first encounter with the Stennis Center for Public Service. Through the Stennis Center's Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program, I met with other young staffers around Congress and was paired with a senior staff mentor.

It did not take me long to realize I had found my career niche, and I soon set about broadening my horizons in the budget policy arena. In 2011, I was awarded a Robert Bosch Foundation Fellowship to pursue a specialized professional development program in Germany. While there, I learned first-hand about the German budget process through a joint internship at the German Bundestag and the German Ministry of Finance. Following that year in Germany, I returned to Capitol Hill and specialized in new program areas, including the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy, and I took a commensurate position with the U.S. House of Representatives, thereby gaining familiarity with both chambers of Congress as staff to the majority and minority parties.

In 2015, my career on Capitol Hill came full circle when Sen. Cochran, who had once again returned as chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, asked me to work for him as senior

professional staff on the full committee. In that position, I assisted the chairman and the staff director in managing the full committee work, from organizing the committee to marking up appropriations bills to conducting conference negotiations. It was also in that position that I had my second encounter with the Stennis Center through the Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program, where I met other senior staffers from both parties in both chambers and heard from experts across the country about how to overcome the challenges Congress faces as an institution.

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And oddly enough, this experience in academia has led me to my third encounter with the Stennis Center – this time to lead the Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows program beginning in the 117th Congress.

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Ben Hammond

Collectively, these experiences motivated me to pursue formal academic training in politics, and I left Capitol Hill in 2016 to pursue a Ph.D. at Princeton University. Using my experience as a congressional staffer, I now study American political institutions with a focus on Congress, the separation of powers, and the federal budget. My dissertation leverages an original data set of appropriations with a combination of formal theory and observational methods to explain the design of the federal budget process and to explore bargaining outcomes between Congress and the president in the annual appropriations process. And oddly enough, this experience in academia has led me to my third encounter with the Stennis Center – this time to lead the Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows program beginning in the 117th Congress. ■

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CAMERON LYNCH

WILLIAM AND MARY

Through the Pandemic, I Found My Voice

I am 20 years old, and I am disabled.

You see a healthy, fit, carefree college sophomore when you look at me, but my life has been filled with more physical and emotional pain than you can see through my university sweatshirt and perfectly distressed jeans. I do not let my three autoimmune diseases (diabetes, Celiac disease, and juvenile dermatomyositis) define me. But I cannot deny that they are a part of me, a part of the lens through which I view life. A life that now, for the first time, feels inherently unsafe.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic got especially bad, I started taking precautions. I used plastic utensils in the dining halls, wiped down my study stations, and talked to my friends about the realities of my situation and what it means to be immunocompromised. “This is just how the flu season normally goes for me,” I explained over my third helping of soft-serve ice cream, “I just have to be a little more careful than most.” In the fall, I begged all of my friends to get their free flu shot, even though it made them feel gross, because it could be saving my life. Little did I know how important this would become. As everything went to hell and schools started closing, I knew my gut feeling of impending doom had been correct. This was not good.

It turned out I was correct. I watched as the world moved on without me. Sitting in my parents’ living room, I viewed Snapchat stories and Instagram posts of my friends back in my happy place while my body was too brittle to return to campus

for the fall semester. My reality was one full of anxiety as I knew my body would possibly lose the battle against a virus my friends ignorantly ignored.

Before, disabled college students only had to deal with inadequate campus health services, inaccessible buildings, uneven bricks that strain tired joints, an increased risk of sexual assault, and dining halls that do not accommodate dietary restrictions. But now, the addition of a global pandemic made having a disability even more isolating. Throughout the pandemic, I discovered how ableist our institutions are and how conditioned young disabled people are to accept the inequalities that we face. The school I once loved and thought had my best interests at heart left me to suffer in isolation during a deadly pandemic.

In July of 2020, I had had enough. I felt as if I was alone in the world, being crushed by the weight of isolation and anxiety. Not knowing what else to do, I turned to social media. I posted a letter expressing how I felt watching my friends post on social media of their “perfect” summers and effortless vacation pictures. The response to my post was overwhelming. Throughout the next few days, 40 other college students from around the country direct-messaged me on Instagram, saying they finally felt heard and understood through my letter. For the first time in months, I felt as if the fog covering my life had lifted. I decided that it was important for us to have a community to rely on in these times. I created a virtual support group through which individuals can feel they have other

students who know what they are going through. We started meeting once a week to have moments of joy and community and even just moments where we could be stupid teenagers and talk about what shows we binge-watched.

Through the course of our conversations, I discovered that our colleges and universities forgot about disabled students. In communication surrounding return plans for the fall, they told disabled students to stay home. This lack of consideration for immunocompromised students was beyond disappointing – especially from the institutions where our families and ourselves have voluntarily placed our trust and livelihoods. Learning that the schools we have come to love were not prioritizing our needs hit hard when we were already feeling isolated and left behind. We were already grappling with the fact that our health was not solid enough for us to live our lives, and then our schools reassured us that we were not important enough to even plan for our return.

The most outrageous example we heard from students – something I experienced with my own college – was that schools refused to offer all classes in an online format. We should not be forced to alter college plans or disrupt graduation timelines because of physical or cognitive conditions that put us at a greater risk while normal students continue forward uninterrupted, taking the classes required for graduation. A policy requiring all students to attend classes in person felt like the university was not prioritizing those who are immunocompromised, leaving us to suffer in isolation. Along with another group member, I decided that this was not acceptable and was a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). We decided to write letters to the public schools of Virginia demanding they improve the treatment of disabled students to match the level of access of able-bodied students as required by the ADA.

When we sent the letters to universities, we received no response indicating that schools understood the magnitude of the situation and the level of discrimination that disabled students faced. We decided it was essential that the schools be held accountable for their decisions and lack of support offered to disabled students who needed help the most in this time. We started reaching out to journalists to try and share our story. Our story was picked up by USA Today, the Washington Post, CNN, and BBC, which allowed other disabled students to know that the media heard them and that the treatment they received was not acceptable.

Through the pandemic, I was able to use my voice as a young disabled college student to demonstrate the structural inequalities that face our society and disabled people specifically. In addition to doing my classes remotely in the fall, I completed a full-time virtual internship in London while living at my parent's house. I worked with Disability Rights UK as their policy intern specializing in youth outreach,



allowing me to learn about British society and policy initiatives. I led a policy campaign through which we met with disabled people around the country and heard what they thought the biggest policy changes needed to be and how society could change to help disabled people fully belong. At the end of my internship, I collated the data I had collected and wrote a comprehensive government strategy to be implemented in the Disability Strategy starting in March of 2021. This opportunity gave me the confidence to move forward in public service. It allowed me to meet with hundreds of individuals to learn more about how we could personally make a difference in their lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most difficult times I have ever experienced. But through the pandemic, I found my voice. It allowed me to find my strength and find a community, one that I had never had before. Despite the destruction of the virus, we have had the opportunity as a society to grow more inclusive and accessible for everyone. We now have the infrastructure to host meetings online, allowing individuals to attend from home, widening the possibilities for disabled individuals. The world is not always built for disabled people, but I do believe that one day it will be. All it takes is understanding and a little compassion. Life is not easy with a disability, and society has told us that we should be “used to” or (worse) ashamed. But alongside many others, I am working to actively change this, creating a society that accepts and includes us. ■



KESHAV RAGHU

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Catalyzing Change from the Ground Up



“For the final time, this is Senator Raghu.” With those momentous words, I concluded my four-year journey in high school Congressional Debate competition. I was endlessly thankful for what Congressional Debate gave me - as much as I put in, I received back twofold. The countless hours I spent poring over legislative nuances, drafting policy briefs, and speaking to my peers (and the occasional wall) shaped my character, informed my worldview, and defined my goals and aspirations for the future.

And yet, as I walked to the podium one final time, I couldn't help but ask myself, “What's next?”

While Congressional Debate gave me a platform to exercise my ability to speak on issues important to me - informed both by research and my lived experience - I often found my impact limited to the cramped walls of the classrooms where we practiced and competed. We would constantly debate broad sweeping legislation - raising the minimum wage, increasing military aid to foreign nations, universal health care. But getting involved in the actual enactment of these policies seemed daunting and, frankly, impossible for an incoming undergraduate who hadn't even turned 18 years of age yet. I knew I wanted to take the skills, visions, and ideas I gained in Congressional Debate and apply them to the real world, but I didn't know where to start.

Fortunately, in my freshman year at the University of Chicago, I happened to stumble upon an opportunity that would change my perception of what civic engagement could be. As a student on financial aid, I was expected to get a job on campus to fulfill

my work-study requirement. While I wasn't opposed to standard campus jobs, like working at the library or being a barista, I wanted to find a unique opportunity that aligned with my career and academic goals while also allowing me to better engage with the greater Hyde Park community. For that reason, I was instantly drawn to the Community Programs Accelerator (CPA) at the work-study job fair.

The University of Chicago, located in South Side Chicago, has been historically negligent about its interactions with neighbors. The university has often drawn criticism for gentrifying the community and making unilateral decisions that drive out long-standing community members who call Hyde Park home. The ivory tower image associated with the university has only grown in recent years as wealth disparities between the affluent Hyde Park areas associated with the university widen in contrast to the surrounding community. Given these growing concerns, the University of Chicago's Office of Civic Engagement created the CPA to devote time and resources to help impactful nonprofits operating in local neighborhoods build capacity through strategic projects.

The CPA is split into three sections: The Core, Associate, and Special Projects. While The Core and Associate projects last anywhere from 1 to 3 years, the Special Projects division, primarily run by undergraduates, operates on a shorter timescale with new projects roughly every ten weeks. Within the Special Projects, I joined a group called Program Design & Evaluation, which, as the name suggests, focuses on helping organizations



Top and Bottom: National Speech and Debate Association's National Tournament

develop programming to assist their mission. The open-ended nature of this group gave me broad exposure to a multitude of organizations and projects within my first year with the CPA. For example, I had the opportunity to help develop an excel toolkit for a cultural nonprofit, create a youth asthma curriculum, and conduct a landscape analysis of Chicago for a local health advocacy group. Through these experiences, I was able to leverage the analytical thinking, research techniques, and communication skills that I had developed in Congressional Debate to create meaningful deliverables for our clients. Despite the context of the work changing dramatically from a mock congressional chamber, the real-world applications of what I had learned continued to be extremely valuable.

However, in my second year with the CPA, we, and the world, faced our largest challenge yet - the COVID-19 pandemic. As cases continued to steadily climb in spring 2020, the South Side of Chicago was burdened with a disproportionate number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. With the lack of infrastructure available to residents living in the area, the mission of nonprofits

serving these communities became even more critical during these challenging times. Unfortunately, just as the recent events disrupted the lives of individuals worldwide, the operations of these nonprofits were also severely curtailed by sudden changes brought about by the pandemic. As such, the CPA launched Emergency COVID Projects to help organizations with the issues they were facing. Although engagements with organizations were done in teams in the past, everyone in the CPA led their own individual projects to cover as much ground as possible. I was tasked with working with an educational nonprofit focused on vocational training and the development of soft skills. Despite their curriculum being dependent on personalized in-person training and feedback, the pandemic meant that this model was no longer possible. In my ten weeks working with them, I helped create recommendations on how to leverage various software and tools to help virtualize their platform. These recommendations were eventually utilized by the organization to continue to deliver their essential services to community members from the safety of their homes.

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I learned that the biggest driver of change didn't always come from federal or even state government. Rather, I learned that by staying involved with the issues closest to me, I could catalyze change from the ground up.

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Keshav Raghu

While it was certainly enriching to research and create digital education solutions, my most significant learning came from talking to the incredible nonprofit leaders running their organizations in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic. Their resiliency, drive, and commitment to serving the community inspired me and changed the way I looked at civic engagement. I learned that the biggest driver of change didn't always come from federal or even state government. Rather, I learned that by staying involved with the issues closest to me, I could catalyze change from the ground up. ■



DELTA SCHOLARS

CULTIVATING CHANGE-MAKERS IN MISSISSIPPI

The Delta Scholars Program is a two-part academic and community engagement program for talented and socially conscious college students interested in moving Mississippi and the Delta region towards a brighter, more just tomorrow. Delta Scholars are selected for their academic achievements and commitment to public service to participate in a ten-day Summer Institute in Mississippi followed by a five-day trip to Boston and Harvard University in the fall. Both experiences form a cohort of young leaders thinking critically about systemic injustices in the Mississippi Delta, with each Scholar developing a project that will produce positive social change in their communities. This is a nationally competitive program aimed at sophomores and above from Mississippi or simply committed to social issues there. Open to all majors, there will be special research opportunities for students interested in public health.

For more information, visit honors.msstate.edu or contact Dr. Christopher Snyder, Dean of the Shackouls Honors College, at 662.325.2522 or csnyder@honors.msstate.edu.

PARTNERS

The Delta Scholars Program is a collaborative effort between the Shackouls Honors College at Mississippi State University, University of Mississippi's Center for Population Studies, the Delta Directions Consortium, the Harvard School of Public Health, the Harvard Law School, and the Phillips Brooks House Center for Public Service and Engaged Scholarship at Harvard College.

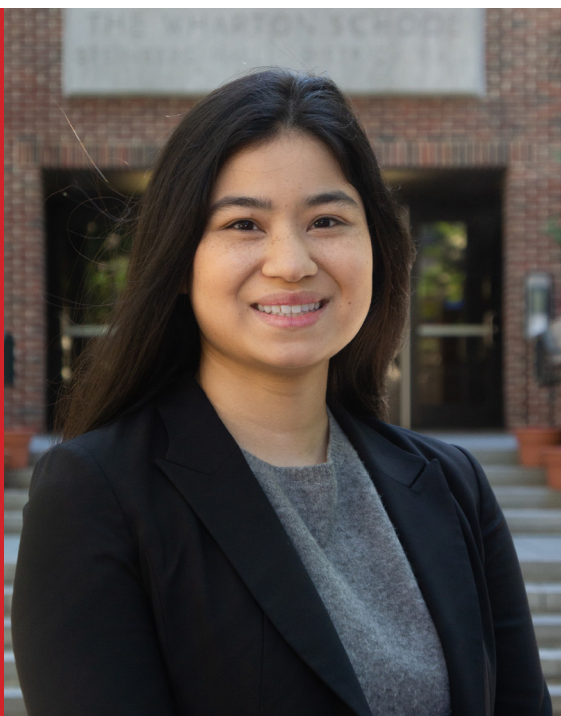
SUMMER INSTITUTE

The Summer Institute is a ten-day immersion program during which each student works to identify an issue of inequality or injustice that they are interested in. Each student will develop a proposal for a project that will promote dialogue and change around that issue in their own communities or the state of Mississippi broadly.

Students spend the first portion of the program at the Shackouls Honors College at Mississippi State University where they engage with faculty and guest lecturers from a range of disciplines to learn about issues currently challenging the people and the economy of Mississippi, including food insecurity, public health, education, and more. Before concluding the summer program, students take an Innovation Tour of the Delta, where they have the chance to meet and learn from researchers, non-profit organizations, and community members who have worked to tackle difficult issues in their community through bold new approaches and community-led efforts. Students have the opportunity to present their own project proposals at the annual Delta Regional Forum in Clarksdale, MS.

HARVARD WEEK

Following the Summer Institute, the Delta Scholars reconnect in the fall for five days at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA. This trip provides an opportunity for students to share updates on their projects, receive continuing feedback, reflect on lessons learned from the program, and discuss how those lessons might be applied to solving other problems in or outside of Mississippi. The Scholars also engage with Harvard students and faculty working on Mississippi issues, including Harvard Law students in the Mississippi Delta Project. The goal of this intellectual exchange is to provide both sides with fresh perspectives, promote dialogue that can push their work forward, and foster networks of young leaders that might collaborate in the future.



KAITLYN RENTALA

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

The Gen Z Public Service Renaissance



The year 2020 – a year that changed the world – began for me in Washington, D.C. On a whim as a freshman, I applied for a “study abroad” program called Penn in Washington, where a cohort of University of Pennsylvania students spend a semester in the nation’s capital interning full-time and taking classes at night. It made sense – the program fit my background and interests perfectly. As a Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) major with an undying love for constitutional law and foreign policy, Washington was the epicenter of my interests.

Theoretically, a career in government seemed perfect for me. But I did not have a clue what that actually meant. No one I knew had ever worked in the public sector. Furthermore, all the private sector stalwarts in my life (and there were many) trashed government. They told me the public sector was inefficient, ineffective, and low paying. I figured before I committed my life to working in government, I should at least see for myself if they were right.

So, I was dropped off in Washington in early January of 2020 with 17 other Penn students, all of us completely clueless. I fell in love with the city immediately. Washington vibrates with intellectual energy. You can feel it whether you are riding on the Metro, walking the neighborhoods, or standing in front of the Washington Monument. But as amazing as the city is, what I truly fell in love with was the people.

I interned at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, working with some of the most accomplished and talented public servants in the country. They were foreign policy

experts, many of whom had long, distinguished careers working at the highest levels of government. As an aspiring public servant myself, I asked them if they enjoyed working in the public sector. If it was the career they dreamed about as college students, and if it was a fulfilling life. And everyone of them wholeheartedly affirmed that it was all of that and more.

I asked the same question to others I met in Washington – my professors, guest lecturers, think tank panelists, and random encounters throughout my time there. I was expecting to hear at least some of them complain about how little they were paid or about frustrations with bureaucracy. And sure, people complained some about those factors, but people overwhelmingly loved their work. They loved serving a mission larger than themselves, loved pursuing an ideal they were passionate about. I was surprised. I was inspired.

And then, suddenly, in the middle of March, my friends and I were yanked out of Washington and forced to return home. The COVID-19 pandemic began slowly and then hit hard. On a Wednesday, we received an email from Penn that the rest of the semester would be conducted online. On a Friday, I was back home.

Being back home in the middle of a lockdown was a culture shock. In Washington, I was constantly surrounded by my peers and coworkers, all passionate about making an impact on the world. I had a transformative experience falling in love with public service as a future career. But stuck back home, with all of my academic and internship opportunities canceled because of the pandemic, I felt lost.

So, I started talking to my friends and mentors, telling them about my transformative experience. And surprisingly, a lot of them related. They had also been drawn to public service. But, also surprisingly, almost none of them actually ended up in the public sector post-graduation. They had been faced with the beast known as the federal hiring process. There were too many government-specific rules and absurdly long waiting periods. And the private sector was so much easier. Companies came to campus. They hosted information sessions and brought back recent alumni to pitch the company. They interviewed on campus, extended offers on campus, and hired people within 24 hours. I realized there was a relatively easy path to the private sector but not to the public sector.



After hearing first-hand from so many about the challenges young people face trying to break into government, I decided to address it. Last spring, in the middle of lockdown, I began writing a book, *The Public Sector Pivot: How Gen Z Will Lead a Renaissance in Public Service*.

As I began researching and writing *The Public Sector Pivot* (set to be published on April 26, 2021), I saw the problem was bigger than I thought. Currently, young people are severely underrepresented in public service. In the United States, only 7% of federal government employees are under the age of 30, compared to 23% in the private sector. The numbers are even worse in tech. Just 3% of the government's 84,097 tech specialists are under the age of 30, while 14% of government information technology (IT) workers are over the age of 60. In some agencies, like in the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, the number of tech specialists over 60 outnumber their under-30 counterparts 19:1.¹

These numbers alone are troubling but combined with the fact that 25% of federal employees plan on retiring within the

next five years, the shortage of young people in government threatens the very health of the federal system.² Altogether, a staggering 150,000 federal employees are set to retire in the near future, leaving a gap of leadership and expertise in the federal government.³

But as I near the end of my book project, I am more hopeful about the future of our government than ever. A lot of people are incredulous when I tell them that. The year 2020 was not good for the world, the United States, or our government. We experienced a global pandemic, a contentious presidential election, and heightened levels of partisanship not seen since the Civil War. But while our government was being pinned down fighting one challenge after another, I was interviewing the people holding the country up. The civil servant fighting for racial equality. The public health officer fighting COVID-19 in populations forgotten to the rest of the world. The technologist who could be making millions of dollars at a big tech firm but instead was using their skills to make health care accessible to all veterans.

“ I wish all Americans could have the experience of talking to people who work for our government because these people are great. They are kind; they are passionate; they are duty driven.

Kaitlyn Rental

I wish all Americans could have the experience of talking to people who work for our government because these people are great. They are kind; they are passionate; they are duty driven. We need more of these people in our government in the future, and Gen Z is eager to take on the challenges facing us. The public sector just needs to commit to investing in the government workforce of the future.

I still do not have everything figured out, and I still feel lost sometimes. I do not know what the world will look like post-pandemic. But what I do know is that this country will need people dedicated to public service more than ever before. And I know Gen Z will rise to the challenge. ■

¹ Jack Corrigan, “At One Civilian Agency, IT Pros Over 60 Years Old Outnumber Their Under 30 Colleagues 19 to One,” *NextGov*, October 1, 2018.

² Mark Hensch, “A Quarter of Feds Plans on Retiring Within 25 Years,” *Govloop*, October 30, 2018.

³ Ibid.



HOLLY TRAVIS

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY LAW CENTER,
BLUME PUBLIC INTEREST SCHOLAR

*Ensuring Voices are Heard in a System
that Prefers Not to Listen*

At age 13, I decided I wanted to work as a capital defense attorney. During the summer before eighth grade, I watched a TV show featuring a character on death row. I learned of the death penalty in the United States for the first time through that episode; I found it deeply disturbing. I spent all of eighth grade, as an embarrassingly large number of my classmates can confirm, reading books on the death penalty and asking those around me what they thought of the issue. By the end of the school year, I wanted this to be my life's work. A few years later in high school, I began to notice mass incarceration's cruel impact on the lives of some classmates, and in college, I began studying the criminal legal system. It was irrefutable; the death penalty was far from the only injustice in the legal system. Not even close. I went to college at Mississippi State University, where I majored in criminology and political science and minored in Spanish. I was fortunate to receive the university's Presidential Scholarship, a scholarship that included an abundance of resources and access to advisors and fellow scholars who encouraged my interest in indigent defense. My undergraduate summers were spent working as an investigative intern at the Public Defender Service in Washington, D.C., and then as an intern at the Office of the Shelby County Public Defender in Memphis, Tennessee. I interviewed witnesses, reviewed surveillance evidence, and conducted social history interviews with clients. The most rewarding part of the work, though, was getting to know clients. These internships were formative; I had known for some time that I wanted to work in indigent defense, and now, I knew I

wanted to work specifically as a public defender. My advisors and mentors at Mississippi State continued to push me to seek additional opportunities to study the criminal legal system. I applied for the Rhodes Scholarship to study criminology at the University of Oxford, and during my senior year, I had the opportunity to interview for the scholarship as a Rhodes Scholar Finalist. I will always feel indebted to the incredibly gracious and supportive community at Mississippi State.

I graduated from Mississippi State certain of my future plans to attend law school, and in the fall of 2018, I began my first year at Georgetown University Law Center. I was attracted to Georgetown Law because of its large community of students committed to public interest law. I was selected to be part of the Blume Public Interest Scholars Program, a program that provides individual students with alumni mentors, faculty advisors, and a full-tuition scholarship. I cherish the Blume community at Georgetown Law like I do the Presidential Scholarship program at Mississippi State; I feel exceedingly grateful to be surrounded by so many incredible students and advisors committed to public service. During my first year, a year ubiquitously known for being challenging, my Blume alumni mentor at the Public Defender Service in the District of Columbia frequently invited me back to her office to check-in and offer her encouragement. In addition, Georgetown Law's Office of Public Interest and Community Service fostered a supportive community of students committed to working in public interest law and advisors committed to helping us get there.



TOP: Holly at the Equal Justice Initiative

BOTTOM: Holly at Georgetown Law

I moved back to the South to work in Montgomery, Alabama, at the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) during my first summer in law school. In a state that resists nearly every effort to recognize the humanity of those incarcerated, I spent much of my summer learning how to strategically navigate the role of advocate within an inherently broken system. Eight years before this internship, I had completed my high school career project based on EJI, and coming full circle, I felt extremely lucky to learn from many brilliant and compassionate advocates there. Ultimately, I left EJI with a greater understanding of the type of advocate I hope to be: one with a deep and abiding commitment to clients, even when that commitment may carry with it far more losses than wins.

I continued to take advantage of the different externships, courses, and clinics at Georgetown Law. When the country shut down due to COVID-19, I was in one of Georgetown Law's clinics representing a detained asylum seeker in immigration court. The country shut down days before our client's court date. The court was in chaos; staff kept losing our client's filing, and the court date kept getting pushed. Finally, after numerous trips to the courthouse, we were able to have our client's asylum hearing, and the judge granted our client asylum. My clinic partner and I were thrilled and held back tears of joy at the victory for our client. We immediately drove to the detention facility, and we were there waiting for him when he walked past the tall, barbed wire fences of detention. Since then, other clinics have adjusted to address the ongoing needs in the pandemic. While a student in one of Georgetown Law's criminal defense clinics, the clinic's focus shifted to address the urgent threat of COVID-19 in prisons. Jails and prisons throughout the country have been hotspots for the virus. Despite this, prosecutors and state and federal officials have worked tirelessly to keep elderly and vulnerable inmates caged, a callous choice that has no doubt resulted in countless deaths. Georgetown Law clinic students joined an extensive faction of lawyers in filing compassionate release motions on behalf of District of Columbia residents held in federal prisons. Last fall, my clinic partner and I saw our client able to finally come home to their family after decades in prison.

As I prepare to graduate law school, I am excited to begin my career this year as a public defender. My commitment to indigent defense has evolved and changed as I have grown over the past 13 years, without question shaped by the many client interactions, learning experiences, and people who have mentored and encouraged me over time. Still, I hope to spend my life working tirelessly on behalf of clients, ensuring *their own voices* are amplified and heard in a system that prefers not to listen. ■

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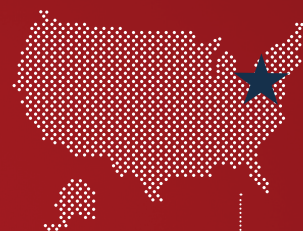
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ANGELA VASOVIC

CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK,
COLIN POWELL FELLOW

Change the Plan, Not the Goal



Among the many lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest for me is that it is impossible to live life according to a plan. During freshman year, as a class assignment, I was tasked with creating a five-year plan for my life. While the assignment intended to help keep our eyes on our goals, the idea that I could design the “perfect” college experience stuck with me.

As a first-generation American who grew up in New York City, I became aware from a young age of the many wonders (and complexities) the world has to offer. My Serbian parents immigrated to the United States to escape the Yugoslav Civil War. The ethnically motivated cruelty of that war left a big impression on me and taught me to value compassion and be sensitive to difficult topics. My late grandfather used to tell me stories of the lives he saved during the fighting as brother turned against brother. His intervention proved to me that empathy and action can make a difference.

I am currently pursuing a degree in international relations and diplomacy at the City College of New York (CCNY), an institution I chose for its dynamic and diverse student population. CCNY has allowed me the opportunity to meet people from all over the world and has exposed me not only to cultural and social differences but to disparities in opportunities as well. I appreciate the stories I hear from my classmates; not only do I find myself connecting to them on a personal level, but they have also broadened my thinking. As a result, I have

dedicated my life to pursuing public service that seeks what is best for all people, regardless of their origin or makeup.

As a sophomore last year, I was selected for a summer internship with the U.S. Department of State at the U.S. Embassy in Valletta, Malta. This internship fit perfectly into my plan, as I hope to eventually become a U.S. diplomat to use the United States’s influence to mediate conflict and promote positive international relations. I remember feeling it was too good to be true! It confirmed my belief that I was on my way and that I could work through any obstacles that might come along the way. My first challenge came as I worked on my security clearance application. As luck would have it, the clearance form was sent out and had to be completed while I was studying abroad in Japan. I got to know Tokyo *really* well as I went from corner to corner of the city to successfully finalize and send my documents.

However, the one thing I could not overcome was the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic grew, the State Department canceled summer 2020 internships. That is when I realized I cannot always live life according to a plan.

Instead, I spent my summer researching civilian deaths in the 2004 Second Battle of Fallujah through a summer research fellowship at CCNY. It was a worthwhile experience, and I am very passionate about conflict prevention and the protection of civilians. While it was not exactly what I hoped to experience last summer, it taught me a lot about the intricacies of conflict and international law.



TOP: Colin Powell Fellowship Group, MIDDLE: Colin Powell, BOTTOM: Angela at CCNY

As I prepared for the fall 2020 semester, I still longed for an experience with the State Department. At last, I received another opportunity through the Virtual Student Federal Service program at the Overseas Buildings Operations. The internship covers the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, and, since the program is intended to be online, it was an ideal opportunity in the current global situation. My main tasks include identifying potential new areas to relocate U.S. Embassies in major cities around the world by mapping key infrastructure and institutions on Google Earth and preparing white papers on economic development to convey a holistic market outlook of each city. Although I do the work largely on my own, I check in biweekly with my supervisor and other interns to update each other on progress and ask clarifying questions. The team I work with is helpful and personable, always expressing appreciation and encouragement and affirming that my work as an intern is important to the office's overall goals. They also make sure that we interns are informed about diverse career possibilities within the State Department. The internship has been an invaluable experience thus far, especially since I discovered aspects of State Department work I had not known about before.

A great guidance in my journey toward life in public service also comes from the Colin Powell Fellowship in Leadership and Public Service offered by CCNY. Established and named in honor of City College graduate General Colin Powell, the fellowship is a two-year program providing coursework, workshops, and mentoring to a select group of students who are aspiring public servants. As a starting point of the program, our first semester's seminar was taught by the Dean of the School, Andrew Rich. He enthusiastically delved into how we can become positive changemakers in a society. Through the fellowship, we became informed consumers of information about the U.S. political and policy-making process, allowing us to better prepare to take effective public service leadership roles. Not only did I gain more information on the policy-making process, but I also found myself to be more confident in my ability to implement societal change through a value I consider important. I believe that compassion can lead to the solution to many of the world's problems, and I want to epitomize this quality through my actions by showing how solutions do not have to be violent.

I am very thankful to have been welcomed and supported by the Colin Powell Fellowship and to have received an internship opportunity in the State Department. As I move forward, I hope to get a chance to represent the U.S. internationally and to make my school proud. ■



Alicia Argrett Interview with Sewell and Roby

being their voice and helping them navigate the maze that is the federal government. That is sometimes helping people get the Social Security benefits that they need, the disability benefits they need, the veterans benefits they've earned. You wouldn't believe the red tape that often goes into that. Like Martha said, there is nothing more rewarding than being out and about in your district, and people come up and tell you over and over how our district offices have been able to help them. You don't get into this business of public service if you're not a people person, and the reality is that you're judged each day by how well you respond to the needs of the people you represent.

We know that the people back home are counting on us to be their voice. They can't come up to Washington and speak at committee hearings and advocate in front of elected officials, so they count on us to do that. There are so many ways that one does it, but it's really rewarding when we are able to do that constituent service or when we are helping communities get grants to make improvements. The federal government has lots and lots of grant opportunities, so there is nothing more rewarding than to help a nonprofit group be able to get access to federal funds. Those funds are out there; we just need to make sure we get our fair share in our districts.

Looking forward, how do you think the people in my generation will shape the world in the future?

Roby: We are counting on you. Your generation has a whole different skill set and experience, especially related to technology. Our responsibility to you is to make ourselves available as mentors and as advisors. There are some things that just don't change, whether there are technological advances or not, and you have a pool of people to draw from to help you through that.

Sewell: Absolutely. You know they say that if you don't know your history, you are doomed to repeat bad parts of your history. I think representing Alabama's 7th District of Birmingham, Montgomery, and my hometown of Selma, part of my job is not just to further advance the people who are in my district now but also to make sure we reward and honor the amazing legacy that is in Alabama. I know we are both very proud of the fact that it was ordinary Alabamians in Montgomery and Birmingham and Selma that helped this country live up to its constitutional ideals of equality and justice for all. To be able to walk the halls of Congress where civil rights laws were passed, where voting rights laws were passed, is a huge honor.

But it also reminds me that we have to protect that legacy. Every generation has to fight again to maintain the progress we have achieved and to advance it. We were able to work with John Lewis, who every year would come back on a pilgrimage through our district and our state to remind people of the importance of civic engagement and political participation. I don't want to get

too teary-eyed, but I think it's important that we remember and learn from our past. What was amazing about those civil rights activists is that they were strategists; they had a genius about the fact that it was a nonviolent protest, which was one of the appeals of it. So, we come from a very rich history, and I think it's incumbent upon all of us to know that history, to protect that history and move things forward. We also have to realize that progress is elusive, so every generation has its part to play. Even the most painful parts of our history, we must embrace and tell those stories, remember those legacies and pay it forward. That's what your generation has an opportunity to do.

Roby: You have so much to offer, and we have to be willing to help be there to bring you along and to make ourselves available. You guys have grown up in a world that, in a lot of ways, is very foreign to us. We have a lot to learn from you because of that. Collectively, we each have a responsibility to help the next generation in their endeavors and make ourselves available. We are counting on you to step up and lead, but we are here to give you the tools to know-how.

Sewell: In fact, I think from both of our stories, you understand that you have to see it to know that you can achieve it and be it. Long before we ran for Congress, we had to know in our hearts that we could actually be a congressperson. The experience of interning on Capitol Hill was invaluable in giving us a glimpse at what is possible.

Representative Sewell already mentioned the importance of working across the aisle and mastering the art of compromise. How do both of you see bipartisanship taking form in the future?

Roby: The thing that makes me the saddest is that the American people don't have an inside view of how much we actually like each other. Every day that I was in Congress, I was working with my colleagues across the aisle on something, if not multiple things, at the same time. I had the privilege of serving on the [House] Appropriations Committee. I will tell you that the work in that committee was, the majority of the time, bipartisan in nature. We respected each other, and we treated each other with kindness. Yes, we were passionate advocates for our positions when there were differences of opinion, but we could all go out to dinner and be friends.

Nothing demonstrates that more than my relationship with Terri. Terri is not just a member of the Alabama delegation to me; Terri is one of my dearest friends. Terri and I have the benefit of working together for the betterment of Alabama, but we also made a point to go spend time with each other and just be friends, knowing about each other's families and knowing what's going on in each other's lives. We joke that we would spend the first few minutes talking about policy at a dinner and then spend the rest of the time talking about our families and what's going on in our lives. I'll tell you: the benefit of those first few minutes talking about policy was to say to my friend, "I know you, and I disagree

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We are counting on you. Your generation has a whole different skill set and experience, especially related to technology. Our responsibility to you is to make ourselves available as mentors and as advisors.

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U.S. Rep. Martha Roby



U.S. Rep. Martha Roby at 2019 SWIPS Conference



Reps. Sewell and Roby at 2019 SWIPS Conference

about this particular issue, so help me understand where you're coming from. I feel like if I can understand where you're coming from, then it may change my perspective, or it may at least give me an understanding as to why we are taking differing positions on a piece of legislation."

It saddens me, particularly in recent days, that what was being projected on our nation and the world was not necessarily reality. We have real relationships with one another and care about each other and treat each other with respect. Sometimes it's the loudest voices on both sides that create a narrative that is not representative of the whole. We try to not only understand each other's perspectives but know each other, not just as a policymaker putting their voting card in the voting box. I just wish there was a way to convey that to the American people because I think that would give people hope to see these real relationships exist, like the friendship that I have with Terri.

Sewell: Well said, Martha. Politics, because we now have the internet and social media, is 24/7. You can actually decide you're only going to watch one channel or only hear from one voice. What saddens me when I think about your generation is that politics has gotten such a bad rap. We respect each other as people; we don't see parties; we don't see red or blue. I see Martha, who is married to Riley. Martha, who has two children.

These are all real issues: how we spend our defense money, how we allocate resources during this pandemic, how we equitably roll-out vaccinations. So, bipartisanship is getting to know my colleagues as people and trying to understand how we can find

common ground. At the end of the day, I know that Martha wants what is best for the people of the 2nd Congressional District, and she knows that I want the best for the people of the 7th Congressional District of Alabama. Both of us want better education for the kids in our districts. How do we get to that end goal? Well, that's public policy; that's the sausage that gets made. So, people think politics is an either-or proposition. Better solutions come when we listen to one another.

One of the questions you asked earlier was about what I've learned while being in Congress; it's the importance of listening and the importance of developing relationships. The pendulum swings. Today, there is a democratic presidency. Last time, there was a Republican presidency. The pendulum swings, but our job remains the same. Our job is, no matter who is in the White House, no matter who controls the [U.S.] House or the Senate, to wake up and fight for the people of Alabama's 7th to give them more resources and more opportunities. My job is to do all that I can to represent them. That means I have to work with Republicans and Democrats. The best way to do that is to try to find that common ground.

If there was one thing you could change about the way our government runs, what would you restructure?

Roby: Last Congress, the Committee for the Modernization of Congress was created. There are opportunities to streamline processes to make sure we are adapting in a way that doesn't

change who and what we are as a nation, but that we are being the best and acting in the most responsible way we can with the resources we have on behalf of the American people.

We often hear people say, “Government either moves at a slow crawl, or it turns on a dime.” Sometimes, it’s good that it moves on a slow crawl because it allows us to be very deliberate in the way we’re acting on behalf of the people who sent us there. There are, though, ways that we can streamline the processes. We are the greatest country in the world. We are the United States of America, and we may not always get it right, and it’s okay to step back and say, “How can we do this differently to better serve the people we were elected to represent?” This committee and its goals are a great example of how there may be an opportunity to make Congress better and more transparent, and more accountable to the American people.

Is there anything else either of you wants to add?

Roby: You need to know that there are people like Terri and me out there that have served in public service that have walked before you and understand we have a responsibility to make ourselves available to you and to encourage you. I will say again that we are counting on you, and we do know the future is bright, not just for Alabama, but for our whole country because of the generation coming behind us. We want to encourage each and every one of you to get involved in your community. Even if you never put your name on a ballot, bloom where you’re planted! Look for opportunities to be of service to others in whatever form that takes. Also, be bold. Find that mentor or mentors that you

can draw from to gain perspective about what you want your own journey to look like. If you pray that the doors open, and sometimes they will and sometimes they won’t, you have to have the courage to walk through them. That’s where we come in to encourage you to be there for counsel and advice at any time.

Sewell: I want to say in closing that it is such a pleasure for me to not only call my dear friend Marthy Roby a colleague, but it is especially a pleasure for me to call her my dear friend. I think more folks should see the fact that you can be from different political parties and yet work together when you can. That is how you get things done in Washington, or in state politics and local politics.

Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to walk the halls of Congress as a member, had a great saying: “Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth.” Public service is an obligation for all of us who get an opportunity to be citizens of America, the best, most prosperous country in the world. What do we do to make this great country better? That’s public service. It’s accessible to each and every one of us and gives all of us the opportunity to bloom where we’re planted. But can we also acknowledge that it is our differentness that makes us excellent? That means that every decision-making table or group should be as diverse as possible. I often tell women who ask me about being a woman in politics the same thing I’m telling everyone else: make your voice heard. Your voice matters. Your vote is your voice, so you have an opportunity to be at the decision-making table. Speak up and speak out. As John Lewis would say to Martha and me often, “Get into some good trouble, necessary trouble.” ■

“
Our job is, no matter who is in the White House, no matter who controls the [U.S.] House or the Senate, to wake up and fight for the people of Alabama’s 7th to give them more resources and more opportunities.
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U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell



U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell at 2019 SWIPS Conference



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